Business English toolkit: register, numbers, meetings and negotiating

BEC Business English

What this topic covers

Some English appears in every BEC paper: choosing how formal to be, saying and hearing numbers, describing changes in figures, and the phrases of phone calls, meetings and negotiations. This topic collects that toolkit in one place, so you can use it in Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking.

- **Register**: how formal to be, and how to change it.
- **Numbers**: money, decimals, dates, and the *-teen* / *-ty* trap.
- **Trends**: words for going up, going down and staying the same.
- **Phone calls, meetings, negotiating**: the phrases for each stage.

Register: friendly, neutral, formal

	Friendly	Neutral	Formal
Use it with	colleagues you know well	most colleagues, regular customers	new customers, suppliers, complaints, senior managers you don't know
Greeting	*Hi Tom,*	*Dear Tom,* · *Hello Ms Li,*	*Dear Ms Li,* · *Dear Sir or Madam,*
Asking	*Can you…?*	*Could you…, please?*	*I would be grateful if you could…*
Ending	*Thanks, Amy*	*Best regards,*	*Yours sincerely,* · *Yours faithfully,*

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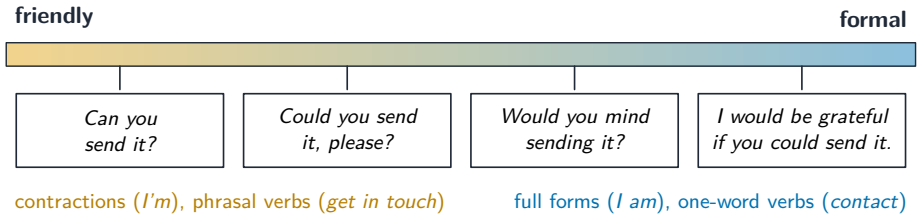


The same request, four levels of formality

- **Formal** English uses full forms (*I am*, not *I'm*), longer polite phrases and one-word verbs: *receive*, *contact*, *postpone*.
- **Friendly** English uses a **contraction** (*I'm*, *we'll*) and a **phrasal verb** (*get in touch*, *put off*, *find out*).
- *Yours sincerely* follows *Dear Ms Li* (you know the name); *Yours faithfully* follows *Dear Sir or Madam* (you don't).

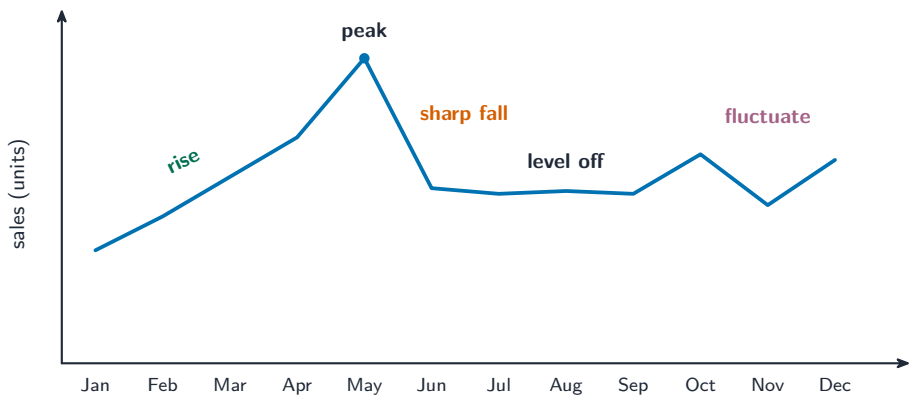
Numbers: say them, hear them

Written	Said
£2.50	*two pounds fifty*
€1,200	*one thousand two hundred euros* (or *twelve hundred euros*)
3.5%	*three point five per cent*
¥2.4m	*two point four million yuan*
15 / 50	*fif-**TEEN** / **FIF**-ty*
3/6 (date)	British: *the third of June*; American: *March sixth*

- The **decimal point** is said *point*: 0.75 = *nought point seven five* or *zero point seven five*.
- In British English say *and* after *hundred*: *three hundred **and** twenty*.
- On the phone, when a number matters, **check**: *"Was that one-five or five-zero?"*

Trends: describing changes in figures

Higher Writing Part 1, Preliminary Reading Part 3 and many Listening tasks ask you to describe or understand a graph.



One line, five trend words

Up	Down	No change	Other
rise, increase, grow, go up	*fall, drop, decrease, go down*	*stay the same, remain stable*	*reach a* ***peak***
a sharp rise (fast)	*a slight fall* (small)	***level off*** (stop changing)	***fluctuate*** (go up and down)

- Verb + adverb: *Sales* ***rose sharply****.* Adjective + noun: *There was a* ***sharp rise*** *in sales.* Use both for range.
- Prepositions: rose **by** 10% (the change); rose **to** 2,000 (the new level); **from** 1,800 **to** 2,000.

Phone calls and meetings

Phone stage	Phrases
Start	*Hello, this is Maria from Greenpack. I'm calling about…*
Ask for someone	*Could I speak to Mr Liu, please?*
Take a message	*I'm afraid she's in a meeting. Can I take a message?*
Check	*Could you spell that, please?* · *Let me read that back to you.*
End	*I'll send you an email to confirm.*

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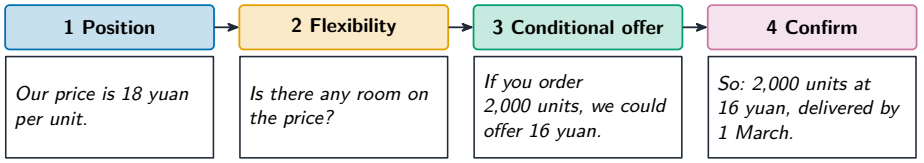
Meeting job	Phrases
Open	*The aim of today's meeting is to…*
Ask for opinions	*What do you think, Anna?*
Interrupt politely	*Sorry to interrupt, but…*
Keep to the point	*Can we move on to the next item?*
Close	*So, to sum up, we've agreed to…*

- Every meeting follows an **agenda** : the list of items to discuss. Many Listening tasks follow one item at a time.

Negotiating

To **negotiate** is to discuss until both sides agree on a deal: a price, a quantity, a date.



Position, flexibility, conditional offer, confirm

- The key structure is the **conditional offer** : ***If*** *you…,* ***we could****…* You give something only **in return** for something.
- Soft language keeps the talk friendly: *I'm afraid that's a little high for us* rather than *That's too expensive.*
- Before you finish, **confirm** every detail: price, quantity, delivery date, payment.

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- △ **Direct requests that sound rude.** *I want you to send the report* sounds like an order. Use *Could you…?* or *Would you mind…?*
- △ **Big numbers.** Chinese counts in (ten thousand); English counts in thousands and millions. 3 = *thirty thousand*; 100 = *one million.*
- △ **"Increase" for everything.** Use the range: *rise sharply, grow steadily, reach a peak, level off.*
- △ **Saying "yes" too fast in a negotiation.** *Yes* can sound like agreement. Say *I see* or *I understand* if you mean only that you heard.

Try it

Cover the answers first.

1. Make it formal: *Can you get back to me by Friday?*
2. Say this number: **2.75%**.
3. How do you say 50 yuan in English?
4. Complete: *Sales rose ____ 15% ____ 4,600 units.*
5. Make a conditional offer: you will give 5% off for payment within 10 days.
6. Which ending goes with *Dear Sir or Madam*?

Answers. 1 *I would be grateful if you could reply by Friday.* 2 *two point seven five per cent.* 3 *five hundred thousand yuan.* 4 **by**, **to**. 5 *If you pay within 10 days, we could offer you 5% off.* 6 *Yours faithfully.*

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. Which register for a complaint from a new customer? – **Formal**.
2. What does *level off* mean? – The figure **stops changing** after rising or falling.
3. What is the difference between *rose by* and *rose to*? – **by** gives the change; **to** gives the new level.
4. What is the most useful structure in negotiating? – The **conditional offer**: *If you…, we could…*
5. What should you do at the end of a negotiation or phone call? – **Confirm** every detail.

Vocabulary card meanings

contraction: A short form of words, such as I'm for I am. phrasal verb: A verb with a small word such as up or off that has its own meaning, like put off. decimal point: The dot in a number such as 2.5, said as point. peak: The highest point of something before it falls. level off: To stop rising or falling and stay about the same. fluctuate: To go up and down again and again. agenda: The list of items to discuss in a meeting. negotiate: To discuss something until both sides agree. conditional offer: An offer that you make only if the other side does something in return.

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